

8 August 2000
English
Original: French

Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2000

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Peter Van De Velde (Belgium)

- I. Calendar of conferences and meetings**
- C. Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities**
- 3. Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi**

Introduction and overview

1. In section B of its resolution 54/248, the General Assembly expressed concern that the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi were still underutilized; reiterated its call for their better utilization; and urged all subsidiary bodies of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Commission on Human Settlements, and encouraged Member States, intergovernmental bodies and regional and other major groupings to increase their use of the conference facilities at Nairobi. In paragraphs 14 to 17 of the same resolution, the Assembly reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to assist the aforementioned bodies in improving the situation, and requested him to report to it at its fifty-fifth session on the actions taken to that end.

2. As a proactive measure to facilitate greater utilization of the Nairobi conference facilities, the Assembly, in section B, paragraph 24, of resolution 54/248, decided to establish a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi no later than January 2001.

3. As an integral part of its 431st meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee on Conferences arranged a videoconference, in which the Chief of Conference Services of the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna, the Acting Director of the Conference Services Division of the United Nations Office at Geneva and other relevant managers at the



respective duty stations participated. The Committee also considered the matter at its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000.

4. During the videoconference, the Chief of Conference Services of the United Nations Office at Nairobi introduced the report of the Secretary-General on improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/55/259). The report described the initial steps that had been taken to implement the Assembly's decision to establish a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and projected the effect of the creation of such a service as a factor in attracting more meeting activity to that duty station from 2001 onwards. The United Nations Office at Nairobi welcomed the close cooperation between it and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services in implementing the decision of the General Assembly.

Discussion

5. Members of the Committee sought additional information, *inter alia*, as to the types of organizations and non-United Nations agencies that had approached the United Nations Office at Nairobi for the use of its conference services; whether the proposed structure of the staffing table for interpreters, that is, the fact that most appointments would be at the P-3 level, had had a negative impact on current efforts to attract candidates for the posts and the rate at which those posts were being filled; what the experience of the Office had been with regard to the availability of temporary assistance, given the overall reduction in budgetary allocations to conference services; whether any obstacles had been encountered in making the centre's facilities available for use on a commercial basis; whether the proposed establishment of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi had led to any changes in the relations between the Office and the host Government; and as to whether the decision to de-link conference services from administration at the Office contravened the recent recommendation of the Committee for Programme and Coordination to the General Assembly that closer links be developed between conference services at duty stations away from Headquarters and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services.

6. Replying to the questions raised, the Chief of Conference Services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi said that the news about the proposed establishment of a permanent interpretation service at the Office had generated a great deal of interest from potential users of the service and that specific enquiries had been received from a number of intergovernmental bodies and private sector entities. On the question of the filling of the interpreters' posts, he had been assured by Headquarters that most of them would be filled by the end of 2000. The level of the posts offered did not constitute an obstacle to their being filled, since the Office was prepared to launch the service with candidates from the United Nations roster who had passed the competitive exam. Because of the charge-back system currently in place, the Office already had considerable experience in making its facilities available for use on a commercial basis. The establishment of a permanent interpretation service would have no legal implications for the host country agreement. The recommendation of the Committee for Programme and Coordination to the General Assembly was consistent with the current restructuring of the administrative and conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi.

7. Clarification was sought from the representative of the Secretariat as to whether, from a legal point of view, commercial use of the conference facilities at Nairobi might create a conflict with the diplomatic functions of the Office. The representative of the Secretariat pointed out that the main non-United Nations users of the facilities were environment-related treaty bodies. However, he undertook to provide a fuller response to the question at a later stage.

Conclusions and recommendations

8. The Committee noted with satisfaction that the creation of a permanent interpretation service at Nairobi offered great potential for Nairobi as a venue for United Nations conferences and meetings, and that the close cooperation between the Office and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services in implementing the decision of the General Assembly was commendable.

9. The Committee took note of the statement in the report of the Secretary-General that further reporting on the impact of the creation of the interpretation service would be carried out as part of future reports on the utilization rate of conference facilities at Nairobi.

10. The Committee took note with appreciation of the efforts being made by the United Nations Office at Nairobi to attract more meetings to its facilities.

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I. Calendar of conferences and meetings

C. Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

4. Improved coordination of conference services

Introduction and overview

1. At its substantive session of 1995, the Committee on Conferences decided to consider, on a biennial basis, the means to ensure improved coordination of conference services within the United Nations system. Moreover, it requested Conference Services to maintain an active dialogue with the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental bodies, providing statistics and information on previous performance, as well as guidelines on ways and means to enhance the utilization of conference-servicing resources. At its substantive session of 1996, the Committee endorsed the idea of the Secretariat to make the active dialogue a permanent coordination feature and had directed that such action should be taken at Headquarters, as well as at the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna.

2. In addition, in paragraph 15 of its resolution 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to ensure closer cooperation between Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi in order to improve the coordination of conference services. In paragraph 16 of the same resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretariat to engage on a regular basis in an active dialogue with Member States as a permanent feature at Headquarters, as well as at the United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, in order to improve the coordination of conference services.



3. Moreover, at its substantive session of 1998, the Committee requested the Secretary-General to review administrative instruction ST/AI/342 on guidelines for the preparation of host Government agreements falling under General Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, so as to reflect the new organizational structure, which allowed for more effective coordination among the four United Nations conference-servicing centres in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, with a view to determining the most cost-effective option for the Organization, while ensuring the required standard of services. That request was reiterated in paragraph 37 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998.

4. At its 431st meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee on Conferences held a videoconference, in which the Chief of Conference Services of the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and the Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna, the Acting Director of the Conference Services Division of the United Nations Office at Geneva and other relevant managers at the respective duty stations participated. The Committee also considered the matter at its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000.

5. At its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee also considered an oral report on the matter.

Discussion

6. In his introductory statement to the videoconference, the Chief of Conference Services of the United Nations Office at Nairobi said that the high level of enthusiasm of the staff, and the close coordination between the various departments, contributed to the centre's success. The proposal to separate conference services from administration would further enhance the profile of conference services.

7. In his introductory statement during the videoconference, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna said that, although uneven, the workload trend for the various meeting services at the United Nations Office at Vienna, including translation and interpretation services, was generally upward. The potential for further efficiency gains at the duty station had been mostly exhausted and there were now increasing concerns about the quality of output and the need to find the right balance between budgetary resources and workload. Constraints included uneven workload distribution, late requests and modifications to and cancellations of requests, an unfavourable post structure that did not offer attractive career prospects to staff and the imbalance between workload and available personnel and budgetary resources.

8. Questions were asked about the current level of user satisfaction with the optical disk system, the overall vacancy rate, the experience of the Office with the use of temporary assistance during peak periods and the reasons for the high vacancy rates at the United Nations Office at Vienna.

9. In replying to the questions raised, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna said that there had been improvements in the performance of the optical disk system at the procedural level, but no change in the platform used. On the subject of the vacancy rate, by the end of 2000 the vacancy

rate for translators was expected to decline to 2.2 per cent, but little change was expected in the situation regarding interpreters. The Office looked forward to the cooperation of Headquarters in that area.

10. The Chief of the Interpretation and Meetings Section added that none of the interpreter posts at the United Nations Office at Vienna matched the job description of a P-3 interpreter. Posts would have to be reclassified if there was to be any hope of attracting and retaining qualified candidates.

11. The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services added that the lack of incentives and career prospects also helped to explain the high vacancy rates at the United Nations Office at Vienna, as the conditions there were not as attractive as in New York and Geneva. Efforts were continuing, however, to make the duty station more attractive to staff by providing incentives and implementing the system of managed assignments.

12. The Acting Director of the Conference Services Division of the United Nations Office at Geneva prefaced her introductory remarks by commenting further on the situation of vacancy rates for United Nations language professionals in general. She said that the problem must be viewed in terms of supply and demand in the market for such services. Interpreters, particularly those interpreting from Russian into French and English, were in very short supply and the Organization should urgently consider mounting its own training programmes to ensure a steady supply of suitable candidates.

13. Coordination between conference services and the bodies that they served was absolutely essential, particularly at the decision-making and operational levels. A good example of such coordination was the development of a single Internet web site to provide information on the meetings of all international bodies in Geneva scheduled to be held in a given quarter. A daily calendar of meetings was already available.

14. Inter-agency coordination was best reflected in the sharing of common services, notably in the area of publishing, between the various agencies of the United Nations system based in Geneva.

15. The Chief of the Technological Innovations Programme Section at the United Nations Office at Geneva added that the introduction of technological innovations had greatly enhanced the efficiency of the Office's operations. The latest version of the DRITS system, for example, had become a valuable management tool. Speech recognition programmes had been successfully tested and a number of them were currently in use in the various translation services.

16. Questions were asked about the potential for common services in areas other than publishing in Geneva and whether it was planned to embark on a new experiment in remote interpretation between Geneva and Nairobi and, if so, within what time frame.

17. Information was provided to the effect that publishing was the activity that best lent itself to inter-agency coordination. It was a clear product with clear competition from non-United Nations sources and a great deal of duplication existed in that area among United Nations bodies.

18. A number of members expressed concern both at the apparent inability of the Organization to attract and retain qualified language professionals and at the low

percentage of candidates who passed the competitive language examinations. It was suggested that consideration be given to the organization of internal training programmes for potential candidates for recruitment. Other members suggested that a comprehensive study should be carried out of all aspects of the situation of language professionals in the United Nations system, including remuneration and conditions of service.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 19. The Committee on Conferences took note of the oral report by the Secretariat on improved coordination of conference services.**
- 20. The Committee encouraged efforts to promote a more coordinated approach within Conference Services aimed at providing services from all duty stations more effectively and efficiently.**
- 21. The Committee welcomed the inclusion of the videoconference as an integral part of its session and looked forward to similar conferences in the future.**
- 22. The Committee requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the General Assembly as soon as possible analysing such problems as may exist related to recruitment in language services at all duty stations and proposing actions to address them.**
- 23. The Committee invited the Secretary-General to further develop the system of incentives to attract language staff to duty stations with high vacancy rates and to report on the measures taken under the new system.**
- 24. The Committee requested that it be kept informed of the workload statistics at the various duty stations.**
- 25. The Committee looked forward to the revision of administrative circular ST/AI/342.**

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- I. Calendar of conferences and meetings**
- C. Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities**
- 5. Improved utilization of conference facilities at the regional centres**

Introduction and overview

1. In section B, paragraph 27, of its resolution 54/248, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to ensure an increase in the utilization of the regional centres in future work programmes and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session.
2. In addition, in paragraph 120 of its resolution 54/249, the Assembly expressed deep concern about the underutilization of the conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa, and requested the Secretary-General to develop and implement a strategy for increasing their use, and to report thereon to the General Assembly by the end of its fifty-fourth session.
3. At its 429th meeting, on 7 August 2000, the Committee heard an oral report on action taken by the Secretariat in compliance with the above-mentioned requests, pending completion of the final report.

Discussion

4. It was pointed out by the representative of the Secretariat that the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had little control over the activities of the conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa. Although the report that had been requested of the Secretary-General was still being prepared, and would be submitted to the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session, the conclusion was already emerging that a coincidence of constraints was responsible for the low



rate of utilization of the conference facilities at the two centres. In both cases, there had been uncertainty as to whether it was appropriate to use the centres for non-United Nations activities and for commercial purposes.

5. The representative of the Secretariat adverted to a memorandum from the Legal Counsel to the Executive Secretary of the regional commission in Bangkok to the effect that activities were permissible in the centre's facilities only if they were of a non-commercial nature and consistent with the purposes and principles of the Organization. Clarification was sought as to whether the opinion of the Legal Counsel was still valid, in view of the updated guidelines on the use of the centre. The representative of the Secretariat responded that the legal opinion might have been superseded by events and by decisions of the General Assembly.

6. Furthermore, until very recently, no resources had been earmarked for promoting the centres as venues for non-United Nations events, and the post structure at both duty stations had not included positions specifically assigned to the management of the centres.

7. The view was expressed that the Committee should consider the activities of the conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa separately from those of the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, which operated under a different status and a specific set of constraints.

Conclusions and recommendations

8. The Committee on Conferences regretted that the report on the improved utilization of conference facilities at the regional centres was not yet available.

9. The Committee took note of the oral report on the subject presented by the representative of the Secretariat.

10. The Committee agreed to keep the item under review and to remain seized of the matter.

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I. Calendar of conferences and meetings

D. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

Introduction and overview

1. At its 429th meeting, on 7 August, the Committee considered a note by the Secretariat (A/AC.172/2000/CRP.3) to which were annexed requests from subsidiary bodies for exceptions to be made to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, in which the Assembly decided that no subsidiary organ of the General Assembly would be permitted to meet at United Nations Headquarters during a regular session of the Assembly unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly.

2. In accordance with the procedure established by the Committee, the requests included explanations as to: (a) why the bodies wished to meet; (b) why they had not completed their work by the deadline of 1 September, as laid down in section I, paragraph 6, of General Assembly resolution 40/243; (c) why it was necessary to meet during the session of the Assembly; and (d) how many meetings would be required. Statistical information was also provided on the number of meetings, if any, that the bodies concerned had held during the fifty-fourth session of the Assembly and the efficiency with which they had utilized the resources made available to them.

Discussion

3. Committee members expressed concern about the inefficient use of conference facilities by some bodies meeting during the main part of the General Assembly



session, as reflected in the statistics on late starting and early ending provided in section II of the annex to the note by the Secretariat, and asked the Chairman to draw the attention of those bodies to the importance of making better use of available resources. Noting that the work programme of certain bodies, notably the United Nations Development Programme, seemed to necessitate meetings in the autumn on a regular basis, the Committee decided to remain seized of the matter.

Conclusions and recommendations

4. The Committee on Conferences recommended to the General Assembly that it explicitly authorize the following bodies to meet in New York during the main part of its fifty-fifth session, on the understanding that meetings would have to be accommodated as facilities and services became available so that the activities of the Assembly itself would not be adversely affected:

(a) Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund;

(b) Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People;

(c) Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund;

(d) Committee on Relations with the Host Country;

(e) Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East;

(f) Preparatory Committee for the high-level international intergovernmental event on financing for development.

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II. Documentation and publication-related matters

A. Distribution of documentation

Introduction and overview

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to ensure that documentation was available in accordance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents simultaneously in the six official languages; urged intergovernmental bodies, when feasible, to become more actively involved in rationalizing their meeting schedules in order to ensure the timely distribution of all related documentation; and requested the Secretary-General to submit proposals based on the reviews through the Committee to the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session.

2. At its 430th meeting, on 7 August 2000, the Committee considered a note by the Secretariat (A/AC.172/2000/6) containing proposals aimed at improving the timely issuance of pre-session documentation, the first two requiring action by the Secretariat and the remaining four requiring action by intergovernmental organs. The proposals were:

Proposal 1

Three months prior to the opening of the session, a planning meeting or an equivalent exchange of communications should be held between the servicing secretariat and the substantive department, on the one hand, and representatives of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, on the other, to review documentation forecasts, bearing in mind the 10-week rule for document submission and the requirement to issue a document on the status of documentation.



Proposal 2

Substantive departments should prepare forecasts of the volume of documentation under preparation and be required, to the extent possible, to keep the length of their submissions within the limits of their original forecast. Such forecasts should be presented to the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services and to the servicing secretariats in conjunction with the planning meeting.

Proposal 3

In order to minimize the negative impact of late submissions by one intergovernmental organ on the timely issuance of documents for other organs, late submissions could be processed by rescheduling the processing of other documents submitted by the same department for consideration in the same body.

Proposal 4

Intergovernmental organs should review their reporting cycles, and periodicity may be introduced in the reporting in the form of requesting quarterly or biannual reports instead of annual ones.

Proposal 5

Intergovernmental organs may wish to authorize substantive departments to prepare reports and submit them for processing in accordance with the 10-week rule, even if all the relevant information is not available and, if it is necessary to include additional information, subsequently submit addendums to the parent document.

Proposal 6

While reviewing the status of documentation in preparation for the sessions, secretariats and bureaux of intergovernmental bodies may wish to decide, in cases of recurrent late submissions, to adjust the proposed programme of work and, as appropriate, adjust the order of agenda items and delay or postpone consideration of items or documents.

Discussion

3. Delegations expressed the view that the proposals represented an excellent initiative and deserved support. It was suggested that the initiative could go even further, for example, in promoting close collaboration between the bureaux of intergovernmental bodies and author departments with regard to rescheduling. Reference was made to the requirement that author departments explain in a footnote why their submissions did not comply with the 10-week rule. A compendium of guidelines on procedures for effective and efficient use of conference services was thought to be a valuable tool for this and other areas of conference servicing.

Conclusions and recommendations

4. **The Committee welcomed the development of the draft proposals and supported the implementation of draft proposals 1 and 2 by the Secretariat. It endorsed draft proposals 3, 4, 5 and 6 and recommended to the General**

Assembly that they should be formulated as recommendations to intergovernmental bodies.

5. The Committee also requested the Secretariat to prepare a compendium of guidelines on procedures for effective and efficient use of conference services and urged it to continue to draft proposals aimed at improving the timely issuance of pre-session documentation.

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II. Documentation and publication-related matters

B. Compliance with the regulations concerning page limits

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, stressed the need for compliance with the existing page limits for documents; invited all intergovernmental bodies to consider, where appropriate, the possibility of further reducing the length of their reports from 32 to 20 pages; called upon the Secretariat to make its procedures for obtaining waivers to the 16-page rule more rigorous, while maintaining the necessary degree of flexibility, with a view to encouraging author departments to reduce the length of their submissions while maintaining high standards of quality; and requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Committee on Conferences, every two years, updated information on the number and length of documents.

2. At its 430th meeting, on 7 August 2000, the Committee considered a note by the Secretariat on the matter (A/AC.172/2000/CRP.2). In introducing the report, the representative of the Secretariat noted that, although the number of documents above the page limits accounted for only 10 per cent of the total, they constituted 54 per cent of the total workload. That meant that even a moderate reduction in the number of documents exceeding the page limits could significantly reduce the workload; hence the importance of making waiver procedures more rigorous.

3. He also reported that the double-column format was now being used in all six official languages.

4. He noted that, in future reports, page brackets might be combined to cover documents of 21-32 pages and of 33-100 pages, and that data for the previous two years might be presented in the same tables for comparison.



Discussion

5. The view was expressed that one way to reduce the length of documents would be to eliminate repetitive background information and to refer instead to previous documents on the same subject matter. End-users could establish an archive of basic reference documents, and only new material would need to be reflected in the most recent report. It was noted, however, that that approach might not be feasible for every type of document.

6. It was suggested, on the one hand, that the same approach might also be taken for resolutions, in which, in some cases, a large percentage of material was repeated from year to year. On the other hand, it was pointed out that, although possibly repetitive, much of the material in resolutions was politically sensitive, and it was necessary to reflect consensus reached.

Recommendations and conclusions

7. The Committee noted that, although the number and proportion of documents issued in accordance with the established and desirable page limits had increased, compliance with the limitation targets for both intergovernmental and secretariat documents continued to be only partial.

8. The Committee further noted that documents that were significantly in excess of the page limit, especially when submitted late, created an additional burden for the processing services and could jeopardize timely issuance and compromise quality. Efforts to further reduce the length of documents should therefore be concentrated on those cases in which page limits were applicable or desirable, since such documents made up 50 per cent of all documentation and accounted for close to 80 per cent of their total volume.